

10. COLOUR VARIATION IN POPULATIONS OF THE GRIZZLED GIANT SQUIRREL *RATUFA MACROURA*

The grizzled giant squirrel (*Ratufa macroura*) is slightly smaller than the Malabar giant squirrel (*Ratufa indica*). Adults weigh approximately 1.5 kg. The tail is grizzled in black and white. The ventral side of the tail has a distinct creamish median line running from base to tip. From the forehead till the middle of forelimbs, there is a brownish black patch. A small creamish patch is present on the forehead. The ears are short and tufted. Forelimb and hindlimb extremities are black in colour. The dorsal side is greyish black and underparts creamish. The lower side of the mouth is a light pinkish colour. The tail is slightly longer than the body. Males have pendulous scrotal sacs, while in lactating females, three pairs of mammary glands can be seen (Prater, 1948).

Until now three sub-species of *Ratufa macroura* have been described: *Ratufa macroura macroura* from Sri Lanka, *Ratufa macroura melanochra* also from Sri Lanka, and *Ratufa macroura dandolena* from Sri Lanka and Southern India (Ellerman, 1961).

The following colour variation has been observed in wild populations of *Ratufa macroura* in South India

1. The best-known population, from Srivilliputhur, conforms to the description given above, with the dorsal side a uniform light greyish brown colour. The shoulder patches were distinct.

2. The animals found in Chinnar Wildlife Sanctuary, in the southwestern corner of the Palnis have a dark back, reddish brown in colour. The crown is also reddish brown.

3. A recently discovered squirrel population in moist deciduous forest at Siruvattukkadu Kombai, Northern Slope East (10° 22' N - 10° 24' N lat; 77° 40' E-77° 43' E long.), is as dark as the

Chinnar population, with distinct dark shoulder patches (Sharma, 1992).

Specimens of *R. macroura* were examined in the collection of the Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS). The specimens were collected between 1913-1948 from Sri Lanka, Salem-Coimbatore and the Palnis.

The specimens from Tamil Nadu (South India) were grouped together in three categories conforming to the areas listed above. The same colour variations were observed. There is also a size difference, with the specimens from Salem-Coimbatore being larger than Palni specimens (Table 1).

Locations	Head-Body max. (cm)	Tail max. (cm)
Salem-Coimbatore	95.5	101.6
Eastern Palnis	87.0	95.2

Since the grizzled giant squirrel is an endangered species strictly protected by law, collection of more material to confirm the subspecific status is problematic. Recording of vocalisation may prove to be an efficient technique to gauge the extent of separation between the three populations.

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